



Their blades reflected light from the bonfires lining the path. Evil, yellow and red slivers. The boys surrounded Greta and she disappeared in a circle of bulky, masculine shapes and shadows.

Virgil drunkenly swiped at the door handle of the Range Rover to exit the SUV, but only succeeded in flipping the door open and immediately shut. And then Shane held him back with a palm to his chest.

"Wait," Shane commanded. He turned off the Rover's headlights.

Through the windshield, bathed in firelight, the scene between Greta and the rough, native boys looked very much like Virgil imagined a matinee in hell would play out: a lovely innocent surrounded by demons with sharp claws and fangs.

"Hey," Shane said to get his attention. "Look. This is where she comes from. These are her people. Relax."

After a while, the boys moved off to the side and Virgil saw Greta - a distinctly female shape - gesture towards the Rover. The boys bowed to her. One gave her a torch. Her face glowed in the light - platinum blonde hair, a perfect, heart shaped face, bare, soft shoulders - and a slight smile on her incredible, full lips.

"Hey," Shane said. "See?"

Virgil drank from his flask with a shaky hand. When he set the flask back in his pocket, he fingered the gun there. It didn't make him feel any more secure. The opposite, actually.

"Here's the thing," Shane leaned over and said, in that confidential, soft voice he used. An affectation designed to make you pay attention. It had never fooled Virgil, but he went along, moving his ear towards Shane's lips. "There are social circles, you understand? Socioeconomic as the intelligentsia say. And you can play up. Right? That's how we met. Neither of us belonged at that place; with those people. Millionaires.... Billionaires even? No, we can play up and shake their hands and pretend that we breath the same air; but everybody knows they aren't our people; and we aren't theirs, but at least we can coexist in a confined space.

"However, you can NOT play down," Shane continued, unlocking the automatic doors as Greta approached the vehicle. "Neither you nor I could walk into that group of men and come out with our skins still on our bones because we do not come from them. They would shear us like sheep. But this is where Greta was born. She can talk their language. See? Safe as houses."

Greta opened the back door and pulled herself into the Rover. "We're good." She dropped the torch outside the SUV.

Ahead the path cleared. The boys disappeared into the night. Only bonfires guiding the way up a long, winding road into to the top of the mountain.

"Think of it this way," Shane put the Rover in gear. "Take any one of those rich fuckers at that place where we met, yes? Take any one of them and put them in a room with you and your friend - no, not your friends now; but your childhood friends? Right? From back in the day. What would happen to any one of those old, rich fucks? Best case scenario; they get away safe but without their wallet. Am I right? Yeah, I'm right."

Virgil had no answer one way or the other. He was turned around in the front passenger's seat, staring at Greta. She used fingers to feather her hair and breathed a sigh of relief. It was too much beauty and Virgil reached in his pocket. His fingers grabbed gun, released, grabbed again and found flask.

"You have to know your place in this world," Shane said, gently pressing the accelerator. The vehicle rolled forward, climbing up the narrow, unpaved path. "That's the key right there. You have to know how high you can fake it; but even more important, just how far you can fall."

Shane turned and winked at Virgil. Again, an affectation, but misused this time. Instead of implying a happy, co-conspiratorial bond between them, it seemed out-of-place and forced. Also, Virgil noticed fear in Shane's eyes - something he'd never seen before.

Virgil nodded and drank from his flask. The Rover continued its slow, cautious climb.

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*I married young; too young. Hard to quantify, but check this: my mother-in-law had Huntington's Disease and I married her daughter anyway. At the time, I was young enough to believe love could conquer all.*

*Fast forward ten years: not even thirty and things were already spiraling out of control. My wife was making bad decisions; and her mood swings were impressive, but then we were not the only ones. All our friends were having difficulty settling into life, such as it was post-millennium. Misery loved company and, with everybody struggling and popping prescription pills during those unsettled years, we never felt alone.*

*Make it twenty years. Although un-diagnosed, I'm certain my wife has the disease. All our friends who suffered with us through those awkward years are gone. Moved away. Some divorced; others living in functional misery. Everyone has been alienated by time, distance and erratic behavior. My wife and I are locked in a stasis forced upon us by early onset dementia. Unable to explain or come to terms with my wife's behavior, our families have abandoned us. I don't confront the issue because, what would be the point? There is no cure and besides, raised Catholic, I do admire me some martyrs.*

*Thirty years. I'm a caretaker for my wife who will not acknowledge there is anything wrong. But I don't blame her - depending upon what statistics you choose to believe, one out of every three or one out of every four victims of Huntington's Disease will commit suicide. Who wants to toss coins with me? So I cook all my wife's meals, practically dress her every day, and whenever I'm not at my job, I follow her around the house with a broom.*

*I drink on the sly. I allow my health to fail. I wonder which of us will expire first, but there is no sentiment behind those flights of fancy. I really don't care. Either way would be fine.*

*Forty years and my wife is incapacitated. Manageable only through a cocktail of drugs. I have to stay with her 24/7/365 to make sure she doesn't get loose and burn*

*down the house or choke to death from drinking water. I no longer have to be sneaky about it so the kitchen looks like a working man's bar. Liquor bottles everywhere.*

*Fifty plus change: my wife is dead and I'm.... Nothing now. Nothing. I've lived over half my life as an isolated servant to a grotesque, dehumanizing, absolutely merciless disease and now that it has left my house, I have nothing.*

*All I know is being sick and alone. I haven't smiled in decades; but then I haven't frowned either. For as long as I can remember, my life has been reacting as efficiently, robotically as possible to the little daily horrors of Huntington's Disease. I've no emotions left. Humanity itself seems alien to me.*

*Turns out love does not conquer all. But then it really is hopelessly outclassed.*

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Towards the top of the mountain, the legs of a stone carved archway crowded the sides of the winding path too close for the Range Rover to pass between.

"Well," Shane said, cutting off the engine. "I guess we walk from here."

Outside the SUV there was a chill to the air. In the valley below, the temperature would still be in the 80s, even though the sun had set hours ago; but this high up in the mountains, Greta had to rub her arms to chase away the bumps. The three of them came together under the arch. The path ahead rose towards a grand mansion, all pillars and stone, surrounded by electric lights accentuating the most glaring examples of extravagance and luxury. From that distance, they could hear music, soft but lively, drifting down from the mansion.

Greta shivered. She stood between Shane and Virgil and hooked her arms with theirs and started them walking.

They hadn't made more than a few steps before more of the native boys appeared from the shadows behind the bonfires, blocking the path. Faceless, dark and sinister. And these boys held guns instead of knives.

Virgil reached in his pocket.

"Wait here," Greta said and went to parlay.

She walked right into their group, speaking low in a foreign language.

"Jesus," Shane whispered. "Jesus.... You still have that flask?"

Virgil handed it to him.

"She'll be fine," Shane continued, but Virgil wasn't sure for whose benefit he spoke. "She grew up here. Yeah. Her old man was the veterinarian in that village where we stayed. And, I guess, the taxidermist also. They call her 'The Taxidermist's Daughter'. Oh, her she comes!"

Sure enough, Greta was strolling back to them. Chin high, confident strides. The gang of rough boys were no where to be seen.

"We're good," she said. She resumed her position between the two men. "Shall we?"

Together, they climbed.

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The grade was steep. It didn't take long before Virgil started showing signs of exertion. Though cold, his clothes were soon soaked through with sweat and his breath was loud and ragged in the still of the night. Too many years an alcoholic with no concern about his physical health had left him feeble and ill. At one point he staggered into Greta who managed to hold him steady; prevent him from falling.

Shane helped her port him off to the side of the path where there was a large rock upon which he could sit and rest.

Heaving, Virgil desperately scrambled for his flask. He guzzled the liquor as if water and leaned over, nose pointing at the ground, mouth agape. "...minute...," he muttered. "...need one minute.... just...."

Greta pulled Shane away. They whispered for a moment then Shane returned, sitting next to Virgil on the rock.

"She'll be back," Shane explained. "She thinks they might have a car up at the house. Something we could borrow."

Virgil tried to insist he didn't need or want any help, but couldn't find the words. Instead, Shane continued.

"Listen, Virgil. What if, when Greta returns, what if we just leave? No, listen. I'll give you back the money. Not just for tonight - all of it. All the money you've... invested with me. What do you think?"

Virgil lifted his head. The stars above were exceptionally bright. Too bright. Their light diffused and spread and Virgil had to close his eyes from their brilliance.

He was vaguely aware of dropping his flask. Then he felt the gun fall from his pocket. And he followed them both to the cold, hard ground.

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*Hating God only gets you so far. Then it becomes childish and unseemly. What then?*

*My back is bowed; my guts are bad. If life ever had a meaning, it was lost to me a long time ago. All I have control over now is my death.*

*That, at least, should have meaning.*

*And maybe it will. If only I can find a way to regain focus... Blink away this veil from my eyes. Put all those shimmering stars back in their proper places in heaven.*